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## RE-DISCOVERY OF THE NOISY SCRUB-BIRD, *ATRICHORNIS CLAMOSUS*— FURTHER OBSERVATIONS

By H. O. WEBSTER, Albany.

### NARRATIVE

It can now be revealed that the Noisy Scrub-bird (*Atrichornis clamosus*) was re-discovered some 20 miles east of Albany at Two People Bay, a camping area for many years with a few beach cottages and fishermen's huts.\* The territory of this first-found bird actually surrounds an isolated hut which is hardly a hundred yards from the beach and connected to it by a narrow path through thick scrub. In my opinion, this bird is familiar with and unusually tolerant of human beings. The sounds of voices, of children playing, of chopping wood and of people moving about do not frighten it but rather seem to stimulate it to louder and more frequent calls. On the other hand, the presumed female is extremely shy and has been seen only about four times. The impression of observers is that the female is rather smaller than the male and probably has no white markings on the throat.

On Saturday and Sunday, January 20 and 21, 1962, Dr. D. L. Serventy, Dr. G. F. Mees, Messrs. C. F. H. Jenkins, D. W. Lamm and myself stayed at the hut. In spite of a strong and unpleasant east wind it was an enjoyable weekend highlighted by the discovery of a second and then a third male Noisy Scrub-bird.

To Dr. G. F. Mees must go the credit for the finding of No. 2 bird. On the Saturday he decided to visit Mt. Gardner some two miles to the south and, accordingly, on Sunday before daybreak he set off on his walk. During the course of it he heard a Noisy Scrub-bird calling in a high valley on the flanks of the mountain. He returned to the hut about 9 a.m., and when breaking the welcome news, said he was afraid it would completely alter our ideas about the habitat of the bird. Shortly afterwards the whole party walked back to the scene of this find and heard the bird give a few short calls. Dr. Serventy and Mr. Jenkins then returned to the hut, to resume observations at the scene of the original find, and on the way flushed a Spotted Nightjar. The other members of the party continued on up the valley, walked round the end of a high ridge to the east of Mt. Gardner and into a valley similar to and parallel to the first one. A third Noisy Scrub-bird was heard to call in the thick

\*A preliminary report of the discovery, in December 1961, appeared in the *Western Australian Naturalist*, 8 (3), January 1962: 57.

scrub on the south-east side of this valley, giving some loud calls and continuing to call regularly as we approached it. Neither of these birds was seen owing to the thickness of the scrub and to the wariness which is such a marked characteristic. However, Noisy Scrub-bird calls are so typical and so outstanding that once they are familiar to an observer, it is impossible to be mistaken when a call is heard. The party returned to camp and later that day departed for Perth. All were highly satisfied with the trip and delighted that more birds had been found.

The next day, at the camp, I decided to follow up this discovery by exploring as much as possible of the isolated, mountainous promontory forming the southern horn of Two People Bay. Accordingly, I set off on what proved to be a walk of at least six miles to the south-east on a beautiful but extremely hot summer day. A number of Bristle-birds (*Dasyornis brachypterus*) were heard calling on the hill slopes on the way and at last I came to a deep mountain gully which runs for over half a mile up from the sea. In this gully, which is filled with trees and dense scrub and contains a small running stream, three Noisy Scrub-birds were heard to call in different parts. Separated by a steep ridge is another, shorter gully and in this another Noisy Scrub-bird was heard. Since that day I have visited almost all the mountain gullies in the vicinity of Mt. Gardner and in all of them, without exception, Noisy Scrub-birds have been heard to call. Also, during these walks, three birds have been heard to call in country similar to that where Dr. Mees found No. 2 bird. Thus at the present date, I know of upwards of thirty Noisy Scrub-birds in the Mt. Gardner section of Two People Bay. This is a very gratifying and unexpected result of Dr. Mees' early morning walk. A careful survey will be made during the next few months and it is hoped that a reasonably detailed map of the area will be available to plot numbers.

#### HABITATS OF THE NOISY SCRUB-BIRD

A rather clearer picture of the country favoured by this bird has now taken shape. There seem to be three sharply differentiated, yet to a certain extent overlapping, types of habitat and I will attempt a short description of each. First I should quote very briefly the accounts of habitat given by the early collectors. Thus Gilbert: "the densest and rankest vegetation on the sides of hills and the thick grass around swamps or small running streams"; Masters: "dense masses of vegetation consisting of tall reedy grass and thick-growing low bushy shrubs"; and Webb: "the margins of fresh-water swamps."

So Habitat No. 1, where the first or No. 1 Noisy Scrub-bird was found is in fact a fresh water swamp area, one part of which is almost dry in summer and covered by a dense growth of rushes, grasses and shrubs (predominantly *Phebalium argenteum*), with dwarf *Banksia* trees here and there. The other part is a thick sword-rush swamp which held water in January and which is completely surrounded by dense thickets of scrub and creepers. The second part also has, in its marginal areas, quite large and numer-

ous Yate trees, many of which were killed by a bushfire some twelve years ago. The area over which No. 1 bird exercises territorial rights in this habitat has been estimated as about 10 acres. It is well separated from the other scrub-bird territories.

Habitat No. 2, where No. 2 bird was found by Dr. Mees, is an upland or high shallow valley some hundreds of yards across in places, which contains no water in summer and probably only briefly running streams and small pools in winter. It is covered, for the most part, by typical thick, low coastal scrub but contains extensive tracts of close-growing dwarf jarrah, marri, mallee, banksia, tea-tree and occasionally paper-bark thickets which range in height from five to twelve feet. These areas of dwarf trees fill the lower parts of the valley and follow the small gullies up to the rocky slopes of the hills. Three Noisy Scrub-birds so far have been found, checked and rechecked several times, in this type of habitat.

Habitat No. 3, where Noisy Scrub-birds have been found and which, I am almost persuaded, is the typical habitat now, if not before, may be described as mountain gullies or ravines. These gullies are a remarkable feature of the mountainous area of Two People Bay and all run down to the sea. Some of the larger ones have a number of subsidiary gullies or tributaries entering them. The longest and largest is probably a mile in length and the shortest a few hundred yards. All are extremely steep, usually descending in a series of giant steps over huge boulders and their sides are almost precipitous. In January the majority had small streams of water running or seeping over their rocky beds and several contained pools of water. These streams appear to be permanent, even in such a dry summer as the last, but sometimes disappear underground to rise again to the surface lower in the course of the gully. In winter brief but spectacular torrents must pour down into the ocean. The vegetation in these gullies is dense and occasionally almost luxuriant with quite large trees, yates, marris, paperbarks and jarrahs in favoured places. Often a bald slope of rock runs along one side, rising in a precipitous curve from the bed of the gully, with the other side a steep rock and earth wall thickly clothed with dwarf trees and heavy scrub. A walk, or rather climb, up one of these gullies is a fascinating and astonishing experience because the vegetation hides and disguises the steepness and the depths.

These mountain ravines appear to be the final refuge of the Noisy Scrub-bird and by their remoteness and difficulty of access at Two People Bay have previously escaped attention. Similar more difficult and remote country exists some ten miles or so to the north, in the vicinity of Mt. Manypeaks. It is very probable that the birds will also be found there, even though a short visit in the company of Mr. John Fisher of Narrikup and Miss Dianne Bickell of Mt. Barker on April 14 gave an inconclusive result.

### CONSERVATION PROBLEMS

At present two grave dangers render the continued existence of the Noisy Scrub-bird here horrifyingly precarious. The most menacing is the possibility that an already surveyed and quite unnecessary



townsite situated on the margins of this limited area may soon be thrown open for purchase. If a small town is established then the birds at Two People Bay are doomed and this will be a reproach to the people of Western Australia.

The second danger is from bushfires during the summer months. On January 29, 1962, a careless fishing party allowed a fire to escape and devastate a very large area of country near Mt. Gardner and on the mountain itself. The territories of at least four male birds were burnt out, but fortunately small areas of scrub were left untouched. Very surprisingly, for the fire in the gullies must have been fierce, at least three of these birds escaped and are still there. A further fire was wantonly lit along the southern section of the bay on the morning of February 18 but stopped at a sandy track and did little damage. It should be remembered that the Bristle-bird, another of our rarest birds, is also to be found over the whole of this mountainous promontory and in the adjacent sandhill country as well.

It is clear that steps should be taken immediately to avoid both of these dangers by establishing a national park or at least a fauna and flora reserve under the control of the Fisheries Department.

## PREPARATION OF BEES FOR CONSUMPTION BY A CAPTIVE BEE-EATER (*MEROPS ORNATUS*)

By C. A. NICHOLLS and D. A. ROOK, Nedlands.

On December 12, 1961, a Rainbow-bird or Australian Bee-eater (*Merops ornatus*) with a broken wing was brought to the C.S.I.R.O. Wildlife Survey Section's Laboratory, Nedlands, for treatment. The bird, an adult, was somewhat emaciated and ill-kempt, and subsequent examination showed the right wing to be fractured at the distal end of the humerus. Since such a break is best left to correct itself unaided, the bee-eater was confined to an aviary whilst we focussed our attention on its food requirements.

Until we were able to procure a small flight of live honey bees (*Apis mellifica*), the bird was given slaters, cicadas and blowflies. The blowflies it would snap up direct from their flight as they approached a lure designed for the purpose, and these were frequently swallowed after but one or two light taps against the nearest solid object. Cicadas, which were provided to the bird in a stunned state at the tip of a pair of forceps, received on an average two sharp whacks before consumption, whereas slaters were given no "killing" treatment at all and simply swallowed immediately.

At no time did the bee-eater seem inclined to flee and paid little attention to the proximity of human beings. It is on account of this that the subsequent observations could be made in the detail presented below.

When, on the second day, live bees were captured and a selection stunned and offered to the bird by forceps, it became immediately apparent that here we were witnessing what seemed a remarkable specialisation in the preparation for consumption of potentially dangerous prey.